



RITA BERNSTEIN

Readers Write GAMES

MY MOM LOVED GAMES SO MUCH that, before she died, she asked us to place some of her ashes in the Boggle egg timer. As a mother of seven, she bonded with her children through games. She didn't dumb you down by letting you win. She also didn't whoop your ass and leave you feeling crushed. She offered tips if you wanted them and allowed you the glory of victory if you were paying attention. Winning or losing was less important to her than spending time together. During a good game, she was invested in the moment with you.

Later in life, she developed Alzheimer's. When I'd visit her in the nursing home, I often took along a deck of cards and played solitaire on her bed, hoping to

spark a flash of recognition in her. One day, feeling overwhelmed, I missed playing an ace. Mom gently reached out, placed it where it belonged, and pointed to the two of hearts. She then leaned back and returned to that world I could not reach.

*Ann Davis
Stewartstown, Pennsylvania*

UNCLE DAVE WAS OUR CHURCH PASTOR, and all the women thought he was next to perfect. He had blue eyes like Paul Newman and a full head of wavy hair. He would even show up at Ladies' Aid meetings, sealing his image as a man who could do no wrong. As an uncle, however, he was stern and intimidating.

Those blue eyes could deliver a withering look that grown-ups never saw.

One Sunday after dinner at Uncle Dave's house, somebody suggested a game of croquet. We had two teams — Uncle Dave and my cousin Lisa versus my dad and me. My dad had a deep laugh and a big heart. He worked for the parks department, digging up tree stumps and planting tulips. He was warm and friendly to everyone, no exceptions.

During the croquet game, my uncle hit my ball with his ball. According to the rules, he could then knock my ball in the opposite direction. He hit it out of the backyard and down the sidewalk: it would take me at least three turns to get back in the game. Nobody said a word. I

didn't let him see me cry. When it was my turn again, I mustered my courage and said, "Uncle Dave, I'm only five." I waited to be reprimanded; no child ever talked back to him. I was amazed when nothing happened. I decided that somehow my father's presence protected me.

Four years later my dad died. My mother had to change her will to name a guardian for me, in case she died while I was still a minor. She chose Uncle Dave. While he signed the papers, Dave commented that he was taking over my father's role now. "You may be my uncle," I said, "but you'll never be anything like my father." Nobody scolded me. They knew it was the truth.

*Marcia K.
Chicago, Illinois*

IN THE SUMMER OF 1993 I WENT TO Romania as part of a study-abroad program. While there, my group visited an orphanage in Cluj-Napoca. Before the visit, we went to a toy store and bought toys for the children. The selection was extremely limited, but we settled on an assortment of simple toys, including a plastic duck with rings that could be tossed over its neck.

When we got to the orphanage, we were met with mild hostility by the staff. These children, I was told brusquely, were not available for adoption. Their parents were alive but either in jail or too poor to maintain custody. (I was told later that some parents reclaimed the children periodically and put them on the streets to beg.)

On the playground, the children hung from the arms and legs of the few beleaguered workers. They all wanted to be held, or at least touched, by an adult. After picking one child up, I was lost in a sea of upraised arms. I was grateful for the chance to express affection, but their desperation haunted me, and has ever since.

No children were playing together. If a child sat on a seesaw and another child dared approach the other side, the first child would scream and yell at the intruder. Thus the three teeter-totters were all stationary, guarded aggressively by children using them as seats.

The duck toy was doomed. The children would not allow us to demonstrate the game. Rather, they clamored for pieces, then ran from the group, clutching a precious ring or the duck to their chest. Occasionally one child would approach another and take a ring by force.

I now have a two-year-old daughter. I worry a lot about making the right decisions for her: Should she take Suzuki violin classes? Did I do an art activity with her today? Should I be working with her on her letters? Is she getting enough socialization? Should I work a second job to pay for part-time preschool?

A few days ago my husband and I took our daughter and her friend to the park. We sat on the seesaw, one adult and one child on each side. The girls were completely delighted, smiling and laughing as we went up and down, again and again. I thought of those Romanian children and took bittersweet comfort in how complete my daughter's life already is.

*Cara C.M. Althoff
Portland, Oregon*

IN THE MIDSIXTIES I WAS A STAY-at-home mom with four children living in a small tract house. Though my husband had a good job, we struggled financially. When he got paid, he gave me some money to run the household and kept the rest for himself. One Friday he left his cash on the dresser. I counted it and was amazed by how much he had compared to how little he gave me. I snuck a twenty, hoping he wouldn't notice. He didn't. The next payday, he again left his cash on the dresser. I snuck another twenty. No reaction. This became our routine.

One Friday there was no cash on the dresser. While my husband was in the bathroom, I scavenged around, searching his pants pockets and jacket. No money. After several paydays went by like this, I realized that he was hiding his cash. He had to get it out sometime, though, so I began to watch him carefully. One night he stayed in the living room to look for a book. The next morning, before he awoke, I combed the room and found his hiding place in a wall unit. My heart raced.

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Coffee	September 1	February 2006
The Middle Of The Night	October 1	March 2006
Decisions	November 1	April 2006
Winners And Losers	December 1	May 2006
Neighbors	January 1	June 2006
Waking Up	February 1	July 2006

I snapped up a twenty.

Now the real game had begun. Each payday I found the money stashed in a different location: in a tissue box, under the living-room rug, in the kitchen cabinets, under a toy in our daughter's bedroom. One morning my husband stood at the ironing board ironing a stack of bills: he'd stashed his money in the dirty clothes, and I'd inadvertently washed it. We both laughed our conspiratorial laughs and said nothing.

I became more interested in winning the game than in getting the money. When I didn't find it for many weeks, I started to get depressed. Then my husband casually remarked about a "wall safe." I examined the artworks in our living room and found that one had a deep frame, creating a kind of hidden shelf. Exhilarated, I rewarded myself with eighty dollars.

Eventually my husband grew tired of playing and announced that he would leave the money out and count it before going to bed. The game was over.

Gail B.

Hooksett, New Hampshire

FOUR YEARS AGO, MY DAD LEARNED he had a brain tumor. Within days, he could no longer construct sentences, swallow properly, or move his right side.

Because part of his throat was paralyzed, eating and drinking became a struggle. On good days, he could raise his own fork. On bad days, I held his head up while my brother lifted a glass to his lips.

Dad's hydration became my obsession. I recorded how much he drank and listened for the rattle of water in his windpipe after every swallow. At night, when I held his toothbrush for him, his tongue seemed shrunken and dry. His skin shriveled and turned white. Light seemed to shine through him at the end.

Even before his illness, water had been a personal issue for us. Dad remembered Idaho's rivers when they were thick with fish — before dams stopped the salmon migration. Growing up in New Mexico, I saw a pinyon forest ripped out for a water-needy golf course. Now I live in Owens Valley, California, a community sliding into desertification. Natural springs, grassy meadows, and water-dependent

plants are slowly disappearing. The valley's smooth soil crumbles into sand. Everywhere I look, I see Dad's dry tongue and translucent skin.

When I go on a long run, I often play an idiotic game: I take an unfamiliar route and tell myself I will find water along the way to refill my bottle. Before he died, Dad survived with only sips here and there. After a century of surface-water diversions and thirty years of groundwater pumping, the valley too survives on sips. I should be able to do the same.

Sometimes I go many miles without finding water. As I become dehydrated, my calves cramp, my cheeks become encrusted with salt, my fingers swell into sausages, and I start to stumble. I find myself trying to suck dampness from an empty bottle, wondering why I play such stupid games. I look at the tumbleweeds and bare sand. I think of my dad and his dry husk of a tongue. I have no idea what it is to be truly thirsty, and for that I feel both gratitude and guilt.

Ceal Klingler

Bishop, California

AT THE AGE OF ELEVEN I STARTED watching my mother and her friends play bridge. Once I began to understand the game, I found it fascinating. If one of them had to leave early, I'd take her place.

In college I played bridge once a month at the Cosmopolitan Club. One Friday my partner, a senior named Alex, was so impressed with my card playing that he offered me a ride home. That's how I started dating my future husband.

Throughout our twenty-year marriage, bridge was one of our regular pastimes. After the divorce, I didn't play for fifteen years.

My son Douglas is a professional dancer and the only one of my children who loves to play cards. He and his friends in Los Angeles started asking me to teach them bridge, but I wasn't interested, so I made excuses.

By the mideighties, Doug had experienced one tragedy after another, losing friends, ex-lovers, colleagues, and health-care providers to AIDS. Then Earl, Doug's closest friend, was diagnosed. "I feel such a comfort when you are in town," Earl

said to me. That's when I decided to teach "the boys" bridge.

Every few months I flew down from Oakland for a marathon session, playing all day Saturday and Sunday. I drew up a teaching plan but soon realized that these young men did not take the rules and conventions as seriously as I did, and I yielded to a more casual form of bridge. Expertise was not the goal; having fun was. So was having a place to talk, and occasionally cry.

After a while the group dwindled to four regulars: Earl and Chris, both of whom were sick, and Doug and his friend Jeffrey. It was a bittersweet time, getting close to people I knew I would lose.

Chris and Earl both eventually died. Now Doug and Jeffrey are the only bridge players left. When I travel to LA, we rope my ex-husband into being our fourth. After all these years, he and I are partners again, if only at the bridge table.

Tita Caldwell

Oakland, California

THE LOCAL PAPER CALLS MY COACH "the Vince Lombardi of girls' softball." We've creamed every team we've played. One night Coach arranges a meeting with our families: he has decided to move the team from the city league to a national softball association.

"There's one condition," he says to our parents. "If you want your girl to stay with this team, she is *mine*. If that's a problem for you, take your daughter home now."

This is not a problem for my family. My father is a violent alcoholic who threatens me with foster homes. My mom, overwhelmed by his rage and unequipped to raise three teenagers, screams about having a nervous breakdown. They don't want me. I am his.

Every day my teammates and I do two hundred push-ups, proud of our physical prowess. In the middle of practice, while we're fielding short hops from the machine Coach sets at seventy-five miles per hour, he stops and orders, "Drop and give me fifty!" No one wants to struggle and have her weakness show a "lack of respect for this team." No one wants to be the one his eyes fix on when he shouts, "Don't waste my time, ladies!" We know

that girls all over the city want out of the bush league.

When we practice outdoors, I dive for the ball and come up covered in mud mixed with blood, gravel, and torn scabs. I pull the ball into me, wind up, and rocket it back to him. When it rains, we practice indoors, where the ball spins off the waxed gym floor. "Get in front of the ball!" he yells. "Don't be scared of it!"

I take a ball to my breastbone. I take it on the chin and bite my tongue and taste sweat and salt.

Our team wins first place in the state and earns a slot in the national tournament. We hold bake sales, car washes, and bottle drives to pay for airfare. I ride a DC-7 from Oregon to Houston. The minute I step into the Texas heat, I am immediately covered in sweat.

At the playing fields, I'm terrified. The other teams are fast and skilled, as tough and ready as we are. For the first time, I wonder if I am good enough.

We lose the first game to a lesser team, because we aren't used to their psychological tactics. They scream, "Goodbye, Ora-Gone!" when we are up to bat. But it's best out of five, and we advance in the tournament.

In our final game against a team named Sid's Forces, I catch a fly ball in right field and throw out a runner at third base. Still Sid's team beats ours three games to two. We take sixteenth place out of thirty-two teams.

As we shake hands with Sid's Forces, our coach is right behind me. Sid nods to him and says, "She's a rock."

Coach puts his hand on my shoulder. "Yes, she is."

*Rachel Indigo Cerise Brown
Portland, Oregon*

I MISSED FOURTH GRADE BECAUSE MY mother left my father and took me to live in the Bahamas. She told my teacher she would home-school me, but we did only a few multiplication tables before going to the beach every day.

On my first visit home to see my father, I learned that he hadn't been living in our house, but instead renting a one-room basement apartment: a sad place with a grille across the only window. Even at nine, I realized he wasn't doing well.

We stopped by to check on our old house, which had been empty for months. As Dad and I walked in, I breathed in its smell and wished I still lived there. Several stacks of mail were waiting for us. In one pile Dad found a big mailer addressed to me. I knew what was inside: I'd sent away one dollar and several box tops for it before our lives had changed.

It was a Froot Loops dry-erase message board with a plastic felt-tipped marker and a picture of Toucan Sam, the cereal's cartoon mascot, on the bottom. Froot Loops cereal was a staple of my diet. I ate it for breakfast every morning, and sometimes again for dinner.

For a couple of hours, Dad and I sat in our kitchen, playing hangman on my Froot Loops message board. We talked about little other than picking vowels and consonants. It was probably the most time I'd ever spent alone with him.

Jeanne B.

Boston, Massachusetts

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